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Globalization, Anthropological Perspective¹Iran, Globalization and Violence

Soheila Shahshahani

- 1 [...] As one example to discuss globalization I would like to bring to your honorable attention my own everyday life experience in my homeland, Iran. Of course I can only be selective in my examples, to cover only topics which would be relevant to today. Whenever I have had the occasion to discuss the term globalization
- 2 in my classes, the general reaction of students has been one of delight, that is, their image of this word is positive. My students represent the view of some 70 % of the Iranian population who are under thirty years of age, of a population of about 67 million people.
- 3 In 1993 the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics in Iran was connected through the University of Vienna to the internet, and by 2005, five million people became users, one of the fastest growth rates in the world. Iran's Telecommunications Company also provided services and by 2009, 25 million users were connected (Rahimi, 2008 : 38). In 1999, following a student uprising at Tehran University, and their general disappointment with President Khatami's reactions and his utter incapacity to respond to their demands, the students turned away from politics, and turned to the digital world. This offered them a universe of other possibilities, they could search for documents they could not have otherwise have access to, they entered universities all over the world and saw their programs, libraries, research labs, and they even contacted professors and got very surprised to find their responses to be amicable and helpful.
- 4 Of course this search was not only academic. For example weblog writing became an important part of the youth's life making Persian blogs « the third most popular language in the world of weblogs », with 60,000 sites on the web (see NITLE Weblog Census at www.blogcensus.net). The first person who started writing weblogs in Iran and who also wrote a guide on how to design and start a weblog in September 2001, happened to be one

of my students, Hossein Derakhshan. He was from a merchant family, disenchanted with the university, abandoned the study of sociology and traveled into the new era with great success.

- 5 Naturally all kinds of weblogs were made, but for brevity we shall remain topical and address events in June and July 2009, with just a short look at music before. Literature and music are the two most important fields in Iran. They are closely related to each other and there is a millennial recorded history. Erudition in each of them takes many years of intensive work. Having conducted some research on the music scene of Tehran a few years ago, I realized that the creativity and the demand of youth was overwhelmingly far removed from Iranian traditional music. The internet was a great help to young people to explore the world of music and to download a vast variety of it. Their interest was, of course, mostly in pop, rock, rap and metal. The performance of such music has been prohibited, so the internet became a domain to find musicians and instrumentalists with similar interests and capacities, and soon they formed groups performing « underground » and putting their clandestine performances on their sites. When on one occasion in 2004 a group was allowed to perform, to their great surprise, the audience sang their pieces with them.
- 6 As their infatuation with knowledge of other countries was great, they also went to perform and sing in a way to be understood by all : In their own language, they wanted to be global, without geographical boundaries, so their lyrics were often in English. This is why most of their music only has an Iranian air to them and why it maybe called « placeless music » (from Taylor, cited in Nooshin 2008 : 85). Such music became a space where negotiation, tension, at times awkward adaptation, and at others brilliant mixtures were made. The variety of attempts or the degree of success in each new creation is a matter of discussion, but it shows a silent debate between nationalism and globalism.
- 7 What is important to us here is the attempt by the youth to challenge the restrictions which surrounded them. In order to go beyond their situation, they used their Iranian musical tendency (I avoid using the term tradition, not to get it mixed up with traditional music), without using its form or content, but they searched within the world of music, using global media, and they got back through it to find their audience and friends. They finally showed their desire to challenge their isolated situation, and they tried « to forge transnational identities, and to stake a claim in a new outward-looking vision of what it means to be Iranian in the twenty-first century » (*ibid.* 2008 : 85). In other words, one aspect of globalization has given the youth the possibility to express themselves in a discursive field of public expression when new identities are constructed and seek recognition at both symbolic and political levels (Alinejad 2002 : 26). It is quite symptomatic that this discursive way does not always succeed to the musician's satisfaction : « It's very hard. It's the hardest deal in all history ! You give all you got, like money, time, soul, feelings, etc., but there is nothing that you gain. No release, no gig, no support, no future. It's so strange to be an underground band in Iran » (*ibid.* : 72). In the same vein in a conference in June 2009 at SOAS in London, two young underground musicians lamented their isolation, confessed to be apolitical, and naively asked to become global. This shows very clearly their vested hope in globalization and how they are experiencing disappointment.
- 8 Now if we leave this discursive attempt and come more directly to youth participation in the June campaign and elections, we see great mobilization which was the result of mass communication through the internet and mobile phones. Green, the color of Islam, on the

Iranian flag, a symbolic term which gained the meaning of healthy and happy life despite many problems (actually it dates to early 1990's that a television serial was made called the *Green House*) and the color of nature was used, by the coalition which was supportive of Mr Moussavi and very soon the call for a demonstration of human chain on the longest street of Tehran met with great success. Many signs and slogans were overnight distributed, and this was done through the use of the Face-Book, sites of important political personalities and the SMS system of mobile phones. An air of festivity and joy reigned in the city. Globalization had won a victory.

- 9 Of course looking back in history, we recall that the 1979 Revolution was to a great degree successful because of the possibility of photocopying pamphlets, making tapes of political leaders, particularly by Ali Shariati and then more effectively by Ayatollah Khomeini, and also the use of Radio BBC. So it has been a tradition in Iran to use the latest technical capacities. It would be a mistake to imagine that the internet possibilities and other global means of communication were only in the hands of the youth in dissent, or a political tendency besides the one in power. The revolution, which had used the latest techniques, has not been leaving these possibilities only to its youth with whom points of disagreement are great. In an interview in the city of Qom in 1998, at one of the top religious centers, I was told that the office of the leader of the Revolution, had allocated unlimited funds for the development of internet possibilities of this center. The spirit of Islam is definitely not against scientific development, rather the aim of this religion to become universal goes along with the possibilities of globalization. So we should be certain that a short documentary film sarcastically entitled « Ayatollah Internet » conveyed quite a bit of truth.
- 10 Being available on the net to solve religious problems of the Moslem world was one aim of this religious center. It is also significant that Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri – who was supposed to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini as religious leader and was the person who was recommended for this position in the Iranian Constitution, but was put aside and was long under house arrest, as early as December 2000 – had put 786 pages reflecting his views on his site (www.montazeri.com). Naturally other political personalities had sites and communicated widely through them (Rahimi, *op. cit.* : 45).
- 11 No doubt all this literature has been closely watched by the government : « In summer 2004... 499 sites out of 1,477 were blocked, this surveillance tactic allowed the state to systematically employ the reactive measure of filtering websites through ISPs in a way to stamp out dissent... since 2004 the regime has been using the U.S.-made commercial filtering package SmartFilter to censor and filter foreign and domestic websites believed to be potentially dangerous to the establishment » (OpenNet Initiative, 2006 : 3-4, 10-14). What any such punishment does beyond direct control of specific targets is the production of fear and its distribution leading to self-censorship.
- 12 In June 2009, right after voting was over, the SMS system was stopped and it has not been functioning again until today. It was reported that Nokia had sold a means of filtering to the government which depicts specific words, and messages went to the persons who write them and warn them automatically about their being under surveillance. Ever since these disruptions in global communication, we are constantly warned to be vigilant, to erase the names of senders on any message we want to forward, and a number of other measures to be taken. (It is noteworthy that international response to Nokia has been such that its sales were 60 % down right after this news was broadcast). In 2008, in an article entitled « The politics of the internet in Iran » the author, Babak Rahimi, talked of

this virtual domain, as one which was « impossible for governments to monitor and dominate » (*ibid.* : 51). He spoke very positively of these « new sites of dissent » and foresaw well the « mobilization of effective individual and collective actions, both real and cyberactive, that defy state control » (*ibid.*). He ended his article very positively, in the spirit of the young generation, « the internet will serve as the virtual battle-ground against authoritarian rule and a march towards democratic governance » (*ibid.* : 53).

- 13 In this example of global communication we see the interacting poles of the government, the youth and the producers of products. The producers claim being value-free, they produce and they sell without political or ethical curiosity. Of course it is evident that certain facilities cannot be purchased by individuals, and they can only be in the possession of governments or very high-standing or rich authorities. The young ignored these facts. They thought capable as they had become, they were soaring above all control. But globalization was also an instrument in the hands of the powerful, in the hands of those who had access to big money, and perhaps more accessible to them, than the ingenious youth.

Globalization and violence

- 14 Now we can move to another aspect which concerns another aspect of globalization and that is the globalization of violence, media and violence, anthropology and violence. Ever since we saw the embattled Iranian youth on the global media, being beaten by black armored men, we have also seen such men in different locations, in China and in Honduras. Of course, in recent years we have seen them in many other locations, too, for example, in Greece, and in the land of human rights, in France. I think if we search in our minds, everywhere we have seen them. Their clothing is all the same, their behavior is similar, they must have had the same training and the same « supermarket » for their clothing and accessories (arms). Who are the producers of these global goods ? Are there any lay-offs in factories producing such goods ?
- 15 What is further significant, is the response of governments : censored coverage of the news, the view that misguided youth manipulated by foreign powers have created these problems, the finger is pointed to the outside, or to some unwanted elements within (a scapegoat) in order to make the state capable to « remove » the problem. We have so much heard about « surgery » ever since the beginning of this century whenever the forces of power want to attack other countries and with just one word they want to get support for their questionable aggressions. Slowly other news comes to fill the screens. The appropriation of the global media space by any news is limited and short-lived, and there is brief space given to expressions of agony, to the show of dissent, to the disruption of ordinary life.
- 16 It is becoming a ritual to observe these global events, peaceful marching and slogans asking for justice, truth and transparency, and a group of anti-demonstration policemen holding water tubes, tear gas bombs and clubs attacking people. Some deaths are reported, more injuries, lamentations of mothers, imprisonment and torture, and some stern state responses. Slowly stereotypes are made, and the power of everyday concerns brings oblivion to all conscientious sympathies, empathies and protests against injustice.
- 17 As Taussing notes, « humans have an uncanny ability to hold terror and misery at arm's length, even when it occurs very close to home » (quote in Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois,

2004 : 26). Utmost, people « put their hope in international tribunals or in independent truth commissions » to deal with such injustices. Again in the words of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois in *Violence in War and Peace, an Anthology*, « The history of human violence teaches us that there are few happy endings. The only answer to violence resides in the struggle to maintain a constant state of hypervigilance and a steadfast refusal to turn into the very same enemy and genocidaire that one most fears and hates » (2004 : 27).

Focusing again on anthropology

- 18 What is the place of anthropology or anthropological observations in these regards? « Anthropologists who make their living observing and recording the misery of the world have a special obligation to reflect critically on the impact of the brutal images of human suffering that they foist on the public that are often profoundly disturbing. Indeed, what do we want from our audience ? To shock ? To evoke pity ? To create new forms of totalizing narrative through an "aesthetic" of misery ? What of the people whose suffering is being made into a public spectacle for the sake of the theoretical argument ? » (*ibid.* : 26). These are indeed very important questions.
- 19 We have a red line which we definitely do not like to cross, this was made clear in Stanley Diamond's *In Search of the Primitive* in 1974. Writing about anthropology he said, « What began as a fraternal endeavor to understand men in their concrete similarities and differences, in order to comprehend human possibilities, is rapidly becoming one of the policy sciences, a discipline of human control, the very denial of humanity » (*op. cit.* : 1). This becoming a « policy science » is what we would like to avoid, becoming an aid to oppression, becoming an expert of everyday life of people anywhere in the world so that they could be manipulated beyond their knowledge and power, to become instruments of injustice. Knowledge is power and where does our knowledge go, where is it compiled, and who has access to it, and how is it used ? All these issues have had long debates about them, and the « rethinking » and « reinventing of anthropology », or the crises it has always been dragging along with it, has been a conscientious attempt not to become a policy science.
- 20 Now what I would like to ask this honorable congregation to reflect and act upon is to have a global protection system for anthropologists around the world to report, to write, to share issues of human rights pertinent in their area of research without risking their rights as citizens of any country and risking their professional positions. How can we as an international body, the IUAES as part of the United Nations, provide this protection for our members ? This can help the development of our science in areas where state control is paramount, where silence reigns, where fear of imprisonment, torture and death are matters of everyday life concern. Areas where people do not even have the barest protection to go to school, to build their houses, to vote, to have a life memory without bombs and destructions, how can those writing about them be protected ? This is the least we can ask for our professionals in this global era. « Humanity, Development and Cultural Diversity » – if these are, indeed, not just words, and we from all different countries and our Chinese hosts believe in them, we need to provide the grounds for cultural diversity to continue, to develop, otherwise there will no longer be any humanity left. So while we accept the risks of our profession, we need the barest possibilities enabling us to continue.

- 21 The repeated crises in our field do not weaken us, it is indicative of our health, it is indicative of our refusing to become just another policy science. We have one foot among the people and we share with them through empathy which is part and parcel of our research, we experience their hopes and their sorrows, their fears and their successes, and we have one foot in the academia in the government and there we are present to occupy more of rational space. If during this century there is great tension between the powerful and the powerless, if the powerless getting more knowledge on governance and technology and they demand more legality, and transparency, and the powerful are clutching to their power with all instruments of power, be it military, digital or legal or sheer money, we are stuck right in the middle. How could we not be in crises ? Please do not forget that the motto of IUAES in 1998 was that « Anthropology is the Science of 21st Century », a century which has started with very harsh human experiences. We should claim our terrain of expertise and occupy as much rational time and space as we can during this century, to show the viability of our work and not accept to be pushed into the margins, we are not any less scientific than, say sociology, we are more conscientious, we are less policy science. We should make both sides, governments and people come somehow to terms, to listen to each other, we know the characteristics of those in power and the powerless. So we should define our tasks recognizing our limitations, and discover all the terrains we have not yet thought of to actualize these aims. The multiplicity and complexity of situations pushes people to dismay, indifference, apathy and even anomie. A sense of resignation and accepting things just as they are, « inevitably so », takes over which is very dangerous. But we must admit that we are in the situation we are today due to ourselves, apathy and indifference serves the powerful, but in the end this is also human all too human. But we can change the direction of even what seems inevitable, and I think our training in distancing can make us realize this, and empower us to act upon it.

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NOTES

1. Extraits de la conférenceprononcée lors des *Distinguished Lectures* du XVI^e congrès mondial de l'IUAES (Kunming, Chine, 27-31 juillet 2009) sous le titre « Globalization, Anthropological Perspective ». Le sous-titre est de la rédaction.

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